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The Necessity of Faith in the Church in the Age of Secularization

ABSTRACT

This article explores the causes and shifts of the ever-growing secularization in the modern world. It also examines the idea that Christ can be discovered without the Church as well as, how the faith of the Church can be explored, experienced, and understood in relation to God.

KEYWORDS

secularization, ecclesiology, pseudo religiosity, Benedict XVI

I. DEGRADATION OF FAITH: POSITIVIST ERROR

A cursory analysis of the contemporary spiritual condition in Europe reveals not only the existence of a powerful religious pluralism but a departure from Christianity as well as the loosing of ties with various religious institutions. Given the wide diversity in various European Union countries, an intensified secularization has resulted from a positivist mistake of the Old Continent. Nowadays there is no desire to fight God or diligently remove Him from personal life or the world's history. We no longer witness an aggressive atheism. Rather God is being ignored and left behind the doors of social and personal life. The views of those who declared, "God is dead" (F. Nietzsche, G. Vahanian, P. van Buren, W. Hamilton, Th. Altizer, R. Rubinstein, D. Bonhoeffer, J. Robinson, D. Sölle) certainly belong to the past, now it is His passivity or even His absence that is discussed. The disease of religious indifference strengthens man in his passive life style and gives him the illusion of freedom allowing him to do whatever he desires without taking a proper position, responsibility, or having remorse. It results in progressive instrumentalism in his personal life and moral chaos in his social life.

Generally speaking, we can distinguish between positive and negative secularisation. The phenomenon is a complex process caused by several factors. Let us mention only those modifiers that cause the transition of societies from a position of strong relationships with values and religious institutions to a position indicated by a lack of transcendental references. Secularization is more than just a separation or disconnection.

The fundamental impulse of secularization includes cultural causes. Excessive rationalization leads to artificially generated conflict between science and faith. Another cause can be found in poor economic progress (development of capitalism, uneven industrialization and urbanization of different parts of the world, globalization), which leads to rapid changes in the lifestyles of people, their greater mobility, and communication, but also anonymity and the objectification of human relations. Economics without ethics leads to the destruction of man and nature. A clear depersonalization of the human being is taking place. Important causes of secularization are also political relations. The point here is not only the otherwise legitimate separation of church and state (the principle of autonomy of both subjects), but – since the

French Revolution, through the anti-religious propaganda of Marxists and scientific atheism, the promotion of hostility towards Christianity.

European democracy has been cut off from spiritual values. Analyzing the rapid process of secularization, we must also point out the psychological aspects that result from an anthropocentric worldview. Man has convinced himself that he is the center of the universe. His extreme interest in himself leads to individualism and changes in attitude about sexuality (sexual revolution). Pseudo religiosity, limited only to emotion or the emotional state, is being introduced. There is a need for spiritualism, magic, and science fiction. Another motive for increased secularization is certainly theological questions. Here we will leave out Judaism and Islam and only analyze Catholic Christianity, which must include a definition of the Church. Unfortunately, Church is limited only to the dimension of the institution. Whereas it is actually a complex reality of divine-human, spiritual and material, heavenly and earthly nature, which combines in a sacramental way both grace and nature (paradigm of incarnation). We cannot ignore the fact of the over-institutionalization of the Church, which has resulted in a natural reflex of protest that has generated a healthy attitude of secularization.

Therefore, in a broad sense, secularization is an ambivalent process. On the one hand, it can lead to the destruction of man and his transcendental references; on the other hand it can be helpful in clarifying his sometimes inappropriate forms of religiosity. The current shape and direction of secularization must be classified as inappropriate for the reason that it does not lead to the cultural and spiritual development of man. The reason for it may lie in the evil of positivism. Speaking in September 2011 in the Bundestag, Benedict XVI undertook a thorough analysis of this overly rationalist approach to the world. He said:

The reason for this is that in the meantime, the positivist understanding of nature and reason has come to be almost universally accepted. If nature – in the words of Hans Kelsen – is viewed as ‘an aggregate of objective data linked together in terms of cause and effect’, then indeed no ethical indication of any kind can be derived from it. A positivist conception of nature as purely functional, in the way that the natural sciences explain it, is incapable of producing any bridge to ethics and law, but once again yields only functional answers. The same also applies to reason, according to the positivist understanding that is widely held to be the only genuinely scientific one. Anything that is not verifiable

or falsifiable, according to this understanding, does not belong to the realm of reason strictly understood. Hence ethics and religion must be assigned to the subjective field, and they remain extraneous to the realm of reason in the strict sense of the word. Where positivist reason dominates the field to the exclusion of all else – and that is broadly the case in our public mindset – then the classical sources of knowledge for ethics and law are excluded. This is a dramatic situation that affects everyone and on which a public debate is necessary. Indeed, an essential goal of this address is to issue an urgent invitation to launch one. The positivist approach to nature and reason, the positivist world view in general, is a most important dimension of human knowledge and capacity that we may in no way dispense with. But in and of itself it is not a sufficient culture corresponding to the full breadth of the human condition. Where positivist reason considers itself the only sufficient culture and banishes all other cultural realities to the status of subcultures, it diminishes man, indeed it threatens his humanity. I say this with Europe specifically in mind, where there are concerted efforts to recognize only positivism as a common culture and a common basis for law-making, so that all the other insights and values of our culture are reduced to the level of subculture, with the result that Europe vis-à-vis other world cultures is left in a state of culturelessness and at the same time extremist and radical movements emerge to fill the vacuum.¹

Christians can be protected against such tendencies through a living faith in their Community, where one can feel confident, not as much about an unproblematic and unquestioned Christianity, but as an assurance to avoid mistakes. Faith demands intellectual disputes and discussions but we have no right to mutate the gift and task of our salvation into irrational thinking and action. Benedict XVI continued:

In its self-proclaimed exclusivity, the positivist reason which recognizes nothing beyond mere functionality resembles a concrete bunker with no windows, in which we ourselves provide lighting and atmospheric conditions, being no longer willing to obtain either from God's wide world. And yet we cannot hide from ourselves the fact that even in this

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, Speech to the German Bundestag, 22.09.2011, in: www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110922_reichstag-berlin_en.html

artificial world, we are still covertly drawing upon God's raw materials, which we refashion into our own products. The windows must be flung open again, we must see the wide world, the sky and the earth once more and learn to make proper use of all this. But how are we to do this? How do we find our way out into the wide world, into the big picture? How can reason rediscover its true greatness, without being sidetracked into irrationality?²

Exploring the faith in the Church that is both its subject and object may help us in this matter. Not only some non-Christians but also quite a few Christians themselves are of the opinion that it is possible to discover Jesus without the Church. This is in an erroneous conviction, which grows out of a misunderstanding of the nature of the Church perceived only as an institution. But I need to explain this further. In order to follow Christ authentically one must believe in the Church. Merely to understand the Church is not enough. It is not sufficient to only investigate the mystery. The mystery of the Church is like a relationship of love better understood by someone in love than someone merely theorising and a precondition for love is faith.³

Believing in the Church is not a simple matter. Empirical analysis can reveal many things, which militate against a trusting attitude towards the Church for we witness in the Church not only beautiful heroic examples in the likes of Francis of Assisi, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and Pope John Paul II, but also much meanness and plain mediocrity. It is written into the nature of every person to be called to love but not all learn to love and believe. Still, let no one say love is an easy matter let no one maintain that faith is something simple!

The Church was born out of faith and rests on faith. From his disciples the Teacher from Nazareth demanded faith above all else – faith in his words, and faith in Himself. The Church then and the Church today was and is made up of those who believe in Jesus. And to believe in Him means to abandon old ways, to free oneself from one's own perspectives, to cast off the old self and be converted. The person who has really believed in Jesus changes his life: "I know in whom I have put my

² Pope Benedict XVI, Speech to the German Bundestag, 22.09.2011, in: www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110922_reichstag-berlin_en.html

³ See U. Casale, *Il mistero della Chiesa. Saggio di Ecclesiologia*, Torino 1998.

trust, and I have no doubt at all that he is able to safeguard until that Day what I have entrusted to him" (2 Tim 1:12).

The Creed⁴ invokes the Church – both the Church that believes (*the subject of faith*) and the Church that is the content of belief (*the object of faith*).⁵ As the subject of faith the Church says: 'I believe' or 'We believe'. As the object of faith, it is said of the Church: 'I/We believe in one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church' – *credo in unam sanctam catholicam et apostolicam Ecclesiam*.⁶ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it succinctly:

It is the Church that believes first and so bears, nourishes and sustains my faith. Everywhere it is the Church that first confesses the Lord: "Throughout the world the holy Church acclaims you" we sing in the hymn *Te Deum*. With her and in her we are won over and brought to confess: I believe, We believe. It is through the Church that we receive faith and new life in Christ by baptism. In the *Rituale* the minister of baptism asks the catechumen: "What do you ask of God's Church?" And the answer is: "Faith." "What does faith offer you?" "Eternal life."⁷

Furthermore, the Church believes not in itself, but in God, and perceives itself in faith as the fruit of God's saving plan realised in history. The Church, as the community of the faithful, believes in God who has made it a channel of his universal salvific purpose. The Church is the 'Mother' of all believers. "He cannot have God as his Father – argues St Cyprian – who does not have the Church as his Mother."⁸

⁴ The confession of faith known today as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. It is the version used most frequently in the liturgy of the Mass. Both the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed were shaped by the end of the fourth century. Both formulas have survived in unchanged form until today. The only exception is the mention in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of the procession of the Holy Spirit also from the Son, the *Filioque*, which the Orthodox Churches do not accept.

⁵ Conf. Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, Barcelona-Freiburg i. Br.-Rom (36) 1976 [further Abbreviation: DS], pp. 1-76.

⁶ Conf. DS 150.

⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., transl. United States Catholic Conference, Inc. Libreria Editrice Vaticana; 1997. Print. [further Abbreviation: CCC] 168.

⁸ Cyprian, *De ecclesiae unitate* 6; Cf. S. Wiedenhofer, *Ekklesiologie*, in: *Handbuch der Dogmatik*, vol. 2, ed. Th. Schneider, Düsseldorf (2) 1995, pp. 52-53.

2. THE CHURCH AS THE SUBJECT OF FAITH

In the confession of faith the Church appears first as the subject of faith. Although every individual believer can say 'I believe' or any group of believers can say 'we believe', if we investigate the theological interpretation of the confession of faith in early and medieval times, properly understood it is the Church, which is speaking for no Christian invents their own faith. Faith is only possible as communal believing, believing together with others. Faith is an event born in a family circle, in the space of a parish, in the bosom of a community. The community of the faithful is therefore the proper subject of faith and the proper means of handing the faith down. In the catechism we read:

Faith is a personal act – the free response of the human person to the initiative of God who reveals himself. But faith is not an isolated act. No one can believe alone, just as no one can live alone. You have not given yourself faith as you have not given yourself life. The believer has received faith from others and should hand it on to others. Our love for Jesus and for our neighbour impels us to speak to others about our faith. Each believer is thus a link in the great chain of believers. I cannot believe without being carried by the faith of others, and by my faith I help support others in the faith.⁹

The Church is not only the agent (subject) of God's activity but is also, as both the result and means of God's activity, itself the subject of activity, namely in the calling to be God's community as congregation and as mediator. From this perspective the Church has a definite role, a definite structure, and a definite organisation. It provides an external institutional way of passing on the spiritual gifts of salvation, and the two are joined in the conception of the Church as a sacrament: a sign and instrument of God's love. The Church as a communion of believers in Christ is not essentially a product of human endeavour, but rather the fruit of God's gift in the service of salvation, linking humans with God and drawing them closer to each other.

⁹ CCC 166.

3. THE CHURCH AS THE OBJECT OF FAITH

In the credal confession the Church is also the object of faith and ultimately is only to be understood as such. This does not, however, put it on a level with the proper object and motive of faith, the Triune Godhead itself. Without exception since the fifth century, the Latin tradition of the Creed and its interpretation has made a clear distinction between the nature of the expressions 'I believe in God the Father... in Jesus Christ... in the Holy Spirit' (*credo in Deum Patrem..., in Jesum Christum..., in Spiritum sanctum...*) and the expression 'I believe in... Church' (*credo Ecclesiam*). The tradition upholds the belief that faith in essence is a conversion, a turning to the living God, an answer to God's call, a reference to God and in God, in loving trust. In the Latin version of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed this faith when expressed in the form *credo [...] Ecclesiam* has invariably been understood, semantically, by default as 'esse'. In this way one strove to express the conviction that the Church was a different kind of reality than God and that one believes in it differently.¹⁰

On the other hand, faith does refer to the Church in so far as the Church is God's work and God's instrument, inviting humanity into communion with God and unity with itself. Faith in God means counting on God and trusting in him; faith in the Church is the concretisation of faith in God, an acknowledgment that God is acting in history. The God of the Church is a real God and a God close to people. It is through the Church that God reveals the possibility of communion with himself and the means of attaining it. The person who believes in the Church does not invent for himself an idea of God, but accepts God as he is, because it is in the space of the *Ecclesia* that God reveals Himself. Because of that faith rids itself of its subjectivism, experiencing in the communion of the Church its verification, purification, and organisation.¹¹

¹⁰ CCC 750: "To believe that the Church is 'holy' and 'catholic,' and that she is 'one' and 'apostolic' (as the Nicene Creed adds), is inseparable from belief in God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In the Apostles' Creed we profess 'one Holy Church' (*Credo... Ecclesiam*), and not to believe in the Church, so as not to confuse God with his works and to attribute clearly to God's goodness all the gifts he has bestowed on his Church."

¹¹ Cf. E. Ozorowski, *Kościół. Zarys eklezjologii katolickiej*, Wrocław 2005, pp. 11–13.

The person who confesses his or her faith believes that the Church is part of the saving gift of the living God and of the eschatological hope of Christians, while ultimately placing faith and trust in the Triune God. Hence any possibility of making an idol out of the Church is out of the question. The Church is more evidently linked to God's saving purpose if one takes as one's point of departure the third article of the confession of faith: 'I believe in the Holy Spirit...' Through the Holy Spirit, in communion with Jesus Christ, God acts through God's people gathered from all peoples.

In the Apostles' Creed¹² the article of faith in the Church is complementary to an earlier confession in this position, namely belief in the Holy Spirit. It originated from the questions asked of candidates at baptism. Affirmation of faith in the Holy Spirit was the answer to the third question asked. To believe in the Church means to allow oneself to be led by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit signifies the presence of the risen Lord among his brothers and sisters. It is the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that enables people to be Christians. Affirmation of the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity, brings about one's full incorporation into the Church. Communion in the Holy Spirit is at the same time a communion with God the Father and God the Son. "When the Paraclete comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who issues from the Father, he will be my witness" (Jn 15:26).

Generally the question of faith in the Church is closely connected with the creedal formula. The Church is the object of faith not because it is led by wise popes or able bishops, but because it is God's work and is led by the Holy Spirit. Belief in the Church cannot therefore be limited to empty declarations. Is the point, then, rather that one should not only believe in God, but above all believe God? In the New Testament Letter of James we read that "faith without works is dead" (Jas 2:26), and even the demons believe in the one God (Jas 2:19). It follows that

¹² The *Symbolum Apostolorum*, the Apostles' Creed, is one of the earliest and simplest formulations of the Christian confession of faith. The earliest mention of it comes from the turn of the fourth and fifth centuries, but when and where it originated is uncertain. In its present form it is probably the result of a long historical process between the second and sixth centuries. It is accepted and used throughout Western Trinitarian Christianity. In the Roman Catholic Church in some areas its use is permitted in the liturgy of the Mass as an alternative to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. It has not, however, been accepted by the Eastern Orthodox Churches.

the fact of acknowledging God is not enough in itself. Nor is correctly understanding that God is One the whole purpose of belief. The surest sign and confirmation of a living faith is obedience: "Obedience is better than sacrifice" (1 Sam 15:22). And the mission of the Apostles was that of "winning the obedience of faith among all the nations" (Rom 1:5). That is why the most important question that believers should ask themselves is: 'Do I really believe God? Do I obey him?'

The verification of one's attitude towards God is believing the Church. Both the formulas already mentioned – believing in the Church and believing the Church – are ultimately completed in a third formula: I believe in what the Church teaches is to be believed. Faith seeks understanding, therefore we need to learn the content of revelation deposited in the Church where the Holy Spirit discloses it to us. It is in the ecclesial setting that the revelation contained in Scripture and Tradition is unravelled, interpreted, and communicated to believers. The Church's teaching is relevant insofar as it communicates God's truths. It must therefore be the teaching of faith.

When we finally compare the two confessions of faith referred to, we note their consensus ecclesiology. The article of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed concerning the Church ran: "(We believe...) in one holy, catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins." The Apostles' Creed, on the other hand, after the words "I believe in the holy catholic Church," added "the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins." Since the third article talks about the Church – where the presence of redemption by Christ and the anticipation of a completion in the Holy Spirit interpenetrate – there is a proper place set aside in dogmatics for ecclesiology. The Church should then be described as a new, redeemed (and ever being redeemed) community, which draws life from the Spirit of Christ in an anticipation of a coming world order, which will replace the old. It can only be fully explained by a close union of Christology, soteriology, pneumatology, and eschatology. Since, however, the Church should be discussed within the framework of a trinitarian faith – faith in the One God who in unity and diversity is both Author and Finisher of faith (Creator and Redeemer) – in the light of all the history of God's dealings with the world, the Church can never be understood simply as a historical-redemptive subject. The Church also serves to express the truths of God the Father's creative and redemptive acts. It is in and through the Church that God's purpose is revealed. Its very life points

towards the final form of God's new creation and the reunification of a divided world and history of conflict, the ultimate redemption of all humanity, indeed the whole cosmos.¹³

4. THE ECCLESIALITY OF FAITH AND ITS ECCLESIAL INTERPRETATION

Comprehending this somewhat difficult question of the necessity of faith in the Church – now as the subject of faith, now as its object – is absolutely indispensable. This is because in the long run what is at stake is the very character of the Church's faith and its interpretation.

Thinking about the Church as *subiectum fidei* may seem somewhat alien in our contemporary world where individualism is generally the order of the day and where human mentality is more readily focused on the 'I'. However, an individual Christian believer does not believe of his own accord, but is a co-believer with the whole Church. This communality is, appearances notwithstanding, most visible and necessary in environment of one's daily life. One's language, one's way of thinking, one's cultural inclinations, one's model of existence is drawn from the area in which it is nurtured. Describing the Church as the subject of faith, therefore, carries with itself an essential unity. Furthermore, it is not an abstract expression but a real one verified by others. The tradition of experiential faith ensures its continuity and by the same token guarantees its apostolicity. Communality protects faith both from excessive emotionalism and from over-rationalism. Therefore faith must be ecclesial.

The connection of faith and the Church is manifest even more clearly from the point of view of faith's interpretation. When we look at the question of *obiectum fidei*, we immediately note the plurality of ways in which faith can be articulated. The Church as the object of faith generates various confessional contents. At the outset there is a natural tension between unity and pluralism in the very interpretation of the Creed. Of great assistance here is the *Magisterium* of the Church, which puts forward a criterion of distinguishing between true and false pluralism. Here, Cardinal Ratzinger clearly pinpoints the criterion of the Church's faith, expressed organically in its normative formulations

¹³ Cf. S. Wiedenhofer, *Ekklesiologie*, pp. 53–54.

taken as a whole, rooted firmly in the references in Holy Scripture to the confession of faith of a believing and praying Church.

The invocation to Scripture, to Tradition and to the *Magisterium* reveals not only the unity of the ecclesiality of faith, but also its pluralism. Hence in Christianity there is no faith outside the Church, and a community without faith is not the Church. One should also definitively state that an authentic interpretation of faith must always be ecclesial and ecclesiological (*die Kirchlichkeit des Glaubens und kirchliche Auslegung des Glaubens*).¹⁴

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¹⁴ Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Vom Wiederauffinden der Mitte. Grundorientierungen*, Freiburg–Basel–Wien 1998, pp. 158–173.